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ABSTRACT

One of the best teaching methods adaptable to the computer is the writing conference. The student and teacher meet at the computer and work with the piece directly on the screen. Holding writing conferences at the computer allows the teacher to get closer to the student's writing processes and to determine the stage or stages with which the student is having difficulty. The ability to make immediate changes gives the students a sense of accomplishment. As they see their papers actually change and fall into place, students truly begin to believe in revision. Teachers holding computer conferences may want to (1) hold two conferences simultaneously; (2) have students bring a paper copy of their texts to the conference; (3) foster interaction between students during the conference; (4) ensure that students are familiar enough with their work that they can easily find the passages they wish to discuss; (5) encourage the multiple version approach; (6) allow extra time for computer conferences; (7) take time to discuss the student's writing process; (8) hold the conferences later in the semester; (9) allow the student to manipulate the program, however well or poorly; and (10) ignore the noise in the computer lab. (HTH)

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The Best Of Both Worlds: Writing Conferences On The Computer

High technology is the watch word of the eighties. Computers are turning up every where, especially on college and university campuses across the nation. There are entire university departments devoted to computer "science." After all, this new technology helps us do everything from getting cash from an automated teller to listening to a mechanized voice ring up our groceries. Granted this new technology has made our lives easier, but as teachers of composition, what effect has technology had on the teaching of writing? Using computers in composition classes is still so new that few studies to date have analyzed the impact computers have had on composition students. And yet, computers are possibly one of the most important connections between present composition practices and the future: as composition is one discipline in which the best teaching methods can be applied to the computer for even better results.

One of the best methods adaptable to the computer is the writing conference. Writing conferences, of course, are only part of the whole approach in teaching writing on computers. From the onset of the computer-assisted writing class, students work on word processors, revising, drafting, and polishing their discourse. Thus, students do not just use computers for writing conferences. Rather, they use them for the entire course. But

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writing conferences held on computers are nevertheless an important method of improving student writing, and even add new dimensions to the writing conference such as collaborative writing between students in conference, and deeper revisions by the students.

Definition of Writing Conference.

The writing conference is a forum in which the student receives one-on-one feedback from the teacher concerning his/her writing. Writing conferences have become a staple in many writing programs across the nation. The writing conference has established itself as an effective way of improving student writing. In a traditional writing conference, the student brings two copies of his/her paper to the teacher's office, and in a ten minute conference discusses ways to improve his/her paper. The student should give one copy of the paper/draft to the teacher, and then read to the teacher the portions of the paper to be discussed. The writing conference is not a "teacher tell me what I need to do to improve this paper to get an 'A'" session, nor is it an editing session. Rather it is a forum in which students come prepared to discuss pertinent questions about their writing with the teacher. The teacher encourages students to make all changes in their papers, as this is a time for the student to learn about their writing, not to be told how to correct their errors. In Eight Approaches To Teaching Composition, Thomas Carnicelli gives five reasons using writing conferences:

1. Individualized instruction in writing is more effective than group instruction.
2. The teacher can make a more effective response to the paper in an oral conference than in written comments.
3. The student can learn more from an oral response than from written comments.
4. Conferences can promote self-learning.
5. The conference method is the most efficient use of the teacher's time. (105-110)

Carnicelli stresses that writing conferences "are especially effective in a process approach" (102). Writing conferences are successful when teaching the writing process approach because the teacher is able to help the student with his/her paper before the paper is graded. Students find writing conferences helpful because they are not the autopsies or after-the-fact-suggestion sessions. Probably the most important aspect of the writing conference is that it helps students develop what Donald Murray calls the "critical eye," the individual's ability to see into the paper and make revisions, instead of depending on the teacher.

The basis of a computer conference is similiar to a conventional writing conference. The student and teacher meet

together in a "one-on-one" situation to review the student's writing--in process. One of the ways in which writing conferences on the computer differ from traditional writing conferences is that instead of meeting over a desk with the student bringing his/her paper, the teacher and student meet at a computer and the student brings his/her floppy disk. The student boots up his/her disk and the writing conference gets under way as the student and teacher begin to discuss the paper. Another notable difference between the computer conference and the conventional writing conference is that as the teacher and student discuss the paper and possible changes, the student is able to make the changes immediately in his/her paper. This is an important point as the student is able to see immediately the revisions in his/her paper instead of waiting until the paper is rewritten or retyped.

Advantages Of Writing Conferences On The Computer

Obviously by holding writing conferences at the computer the teacher gets one step closer to the student's writing process. This step closer often helps a student who has difficulty with certain parts of the writing process. As a student struggles the teacher can give suggestions and clarifications. This is an important point as the teacher is able to actually watch the student's writing--in process. Teachers can determine the stage/stages in the writing process where the student is stumbling. Sometimes students need to come to the computer with a more detailed outline or cluster so that they don't sit and

stare at the phosphorous screen to compose. Sometimes students have problems with the word processor and need clarification about its operation.

One of the real advantages in holding writing conferences on the computer has to do with the student's attitude. Because the students are able to instantly affect a change in their papers, computer conferences give them a sense of accomplishment not attained in a traditional writing conference. As they see their paper actually change and fall into place, students begin to really believe in revision.

The computer conference also tells the teacher instantly whether a student is having difficulty with "computer literacy." Occasionally students have problems picking up computer skills; and the computer conference helps identify these problems and find solutions. Once again the computer conference offers the opportunity to see student writing up close and talk about actually composing at the computer. With the teacher actually at the computer, where the student has been doing the writing, the student is much more likely to discuss his/her writing process.

Holding The Writing Conference

Several factors need to be considered when holding computer conferences. One is the need for students to be working on the same word processing program or operating system. With the master disk in the computer lab, the students purchase a "data" disk which holds their files/papers. Students bring their "data" disk to the computer conference and the student boots up the main

program from the master disk in the lab. The only cost inferred by the student is the cost of the "data" disk, which is a couple of dollars. Students who own their own word processing program cause no problem as they just bring in their master disk with their "data" disk. Nevertheless, having everyone working on the same program helps.

Another consideration is using a word processing program or system that has the "see final version on screen" feature. This feature enables the student and teacher to view the paper in the form it will be printed. Some word processing systems do not have this feature and it would be very difficult to hold a computer conference in which the paper is displayed "wrapped around" the screen as words are often chopped in half, etc..

Another consideration is the location for the writing conference. Some teachers will have a computer in their office, a terminal that students can come to. This convenience is both good and bad. It is beneficial for the teacher, but not as advantageous for the students. I hold my computer conferences in the same lab where students work on their papers. Here the students are at home. They are used to the busy atmosphere of computers buzzing away. But more importantly, I like the lab situation because it allows me to hold two writing conferences simultaneously.

Suggestions For Computer Conferences

The following are guidelines helpful in holding writing conferences on the computer:

HOLD TWO COMPUTER CONFERENCES SIMULTANEOUSLY. The possibility of holding two writing conferences simultaneously did not occur to me until after I held the first set of writing conferences on the computer. I allowed fifteen minutes per writing conference--five more minutes than a traditional writing conference--to allow boot up time, moving around in the file, and other computer related activities. That first set of writing conferences on the computer drug by, I didn't think the conferences would ever end as I sat idly by while students readied the computer for the conference. Then I had an idea. Why not hold two conferences at once? While one student was booting up, I could be talking with another. I tried this new method and it worked superbly. I still scheduled fifteen minutes per writing conference, but scheduled eight students an hour instead of four (and cut my hours in conferences in half). As one student looked for the place in his/her file to discuss, I consulted with the other. Naturally I had to schedule two computers in the lab next to each other. Then I sat in the middle where I could turn to talk with each student.

This "two-at-once" idea turned out to have some advantages of its own. One of the first things I noticed was that students seem to relax more when peers are present. At first students may be a little nervous having their teacher watch them work at a computer. But scheduling two conferences at once lets the teacher "ignore" the student who is booting up and getting ready.

Another advantage I had not anticipated was the positive

peer critiquing. As one student would ask me a question about an opening statement as to which sounded better I often found the other student chiming in. The students seem to enjoy having one of peers present, and value their comments on their papers. Also with two students in conference at once in the lab, it did not appear to others working in the lab that any particular student was under my scrutiny.

HAVE THE STUDENT BRING A HARD COPY OF THEIR TEXT. This does two things. It makes the students prepare for their conference, as they realize that the teacher will have a copy of their draft in hand. Second, it gives the teacher a draft to glance over and view holistically, as the computer only displays several paragraphs at a time. Having the draft in hand helps to spot structural errors.

ALLOW THE STUDENTS TO HELP EACH OTHER DURING THE WRITING CONFERENCE. FOSTER INTERACTION. As mentioned earlier, students do not feel intimidated when one of their peers is present. Some students find that having another student present takes some of the nervousness out of the writing conference. Not only does the added company help with the nervousness, but students willingly help each other in conference situations. They want to help the other succeed, especially in front of the teacher. Some students even like to sign up for computer conferences together, so they can be there to bail the other out if needed. This collaborative approach to the writing conference can be a very positive experience for both the students and the teacher, and should be encouraged.

ENSURE THAT STUDENTS ARE FAMILIAR ENOUGH WITH THEIR WORK THAT THEY CAN EASILY FIND THE SPOTS THEY WANT TO DISCUSS. This is an important point because paging through a file looking for a particular spot can be maddening, both for the teacher and student. I suggest that students mark the spots they want to discuss with asterisks. Placing four or five asterisks on the left margin by the spot to be discussed saves valuable time. Asterisks are easily deleted after or during the conference.

ENCOURAGE THE "MULTIPLE VERSION" APPROACH. The computer conference encourages students to talk more freely about their papers and to make changes by inserting or deleting a phrase during the computer conference. Knowing they can change their paper and get instant approval or disapproval causes students to try what I call the "multiple version approach." If students are unsure of their opening paragraph they will often bring two or three versions of an opening paragraph on their disk for me to look at and discuss with them. We talk and then decide which is most the effective version. The student then deletes the others. Knowing that they can quickly show me these "multiple versions," my students tend to write several opening paragraphs or conclusions to be looked at during the computer conference. Trying these options has greatly increased student ability to objectively look at papers and figure out if a specific sentence or paragraph works.

ALLOW EXTRA TIME FOR COMPUTER CONFERENCES. Traditional writing conferences usually take ten minutes, but computer conferences need a little extra time (but you can hold two

conferences simultaneously). Fifteen minutes has worked well with computer conferences, as it allows the students time to boot up, find the spot in the text, etc.. Also, as is the case with conventional writing conferences, be prepared. The preparation that both the teacher and the student make is critical to conducting a successful writing conference on the computer.

TAKE TIME TO DISCUSS THE STUDENT'S WRITING PROCESS. The computer conference presents a rare situation to not only observe the students during the writing process, but also to discuss with the student his/her writing process. Sitting at the computer with students allows them to talk through many of the problems they are having with their writing process. Ask questions about the writing process such as "Do you compose at the computer?" and "Where do you make most of your revision, on or off the computer?" Capitalize on the conference by praising the student for what he/she has done right, and gently offer advice for improvement.

DON'T HOLD A COMPUTER CONFERENCE TOO EARLY. For a computer conference to be effective, students need proficiency in two areas. First, they need to have developed a "critical eye" for revision. If computer conferences are held too early students aren't ready to look deeply into their papers. Instead, they stay at the sentence and word level in revision. Second, towards the end of the course, students have their word processing skills down and will not waste the teacher's time fumbling with commands. Trying to have a writing conference on the computer too early only frustrtes for both teacher and student.

DON'T BE TO AGGRESSIVE WITH THE COMPUTER AND ITS USE. Let the student show off his/her skills--or lack thereof. This is an excellent time to gauge students "computer literacy." Often a student will know his/her word processing program so well that the teacher will be amazed by the student's skills. A student will feel intimidated if the teacher tries to "run" the program for the student. Once again, be patient at this stage. Also, don't be surprised if students are a little nervous using their computer skills in front of the teacher. Reassure them that your purpose is not to scrutinize their skills on the keyboard. Praise the students for their knowledge of the program whenever possible.

DON'T LET THE NOISE OF THE COMPUTER LAB BE A HINDERANCE. Most computer labs are alive with the hum of computers, printers, and people. Once again this is a situation that can be a plus. The background noise of a computer lab helps calm nervous students as they don't have to face a quiet office. Ignore the noise in the lab and the lab will ignore the computer conference going on. It is also a good idea to choose two computers in a corner of the lab if possible, to avoid excessive traffic and movement.

In conclusion, writing conferences on the computer are an excellent method of getting one step closer to the students' writing--in process. It combines the best of both worlds as it unites the high technolgy of the eighties with a strong principle of enhancing student discourse.

Sources Cited

Carnicelli, Thomas. "The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation." in Eight Approaches To Teaching Composition. Urbana, Illinois National Council of Teachers of English, 1980.